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SUBJECT: GENERAL PETRAEUS' VISIT TO YEMEN

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY. On November 29, during his first visit to Yemen, General David Petraeus, Commander of the U.S. Central Command, met with President Ali Abdullah Saleh and senior ROYG officials for frank and open discussions. Discussions focused on security issues, including counter-terrorism, piracy and military cooperation. The visit demonstrated that the two countries have a shared interest in combating terrorism and that bilateral military and security cooperation between them represents one of the potential strengths of Yemeni-American relations. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S) During an hour-long meeting at the Presidential Palace in Aden on November 29, President Saleh claimed that the ROYG was "happy and satisfied with the partnership between our two countries" but blustered that the level of USG assistance was insufficient given Yemen's security challenges. Among the President's proposals were developing a comprehensive bilateral security agreement and setting up a regional office for combating piracy located in Sana'a. Saleh also expressed the ROYG's willingness to try pirates captured in the Gulf of Aden in Yemeni courts. (Note: To date, the ROYG has been unwilling to guarantee European Union (EU) officials that pirates would not receive the death penalty, which precludes EU nations from turning over prisoners to Yemen.) General Petraeus deferred to Ambassador Seche on a bilateral security agreement but emphasized a willingness to cooperate against pirates and extremists. (COMMENT. This was the first time Saleh has mentioned a bilateral security agreement to Embassy Sana'a, which he suggested had been discussed during one of his earlier visits to Washington. END COMMENT.) General Petraeus noted that Yemen had taken action against al-Qaeda during the first part of the year, but he observed in the last several months the ROYG had been hesitant to take action against identified terrorist targets. Petraeus emphasized that Yemen was a priority country in his area of responsibility in the fight against terrorism, and he offered that the United States would be willing to provide increased security assistance to Yemen but only if Yemen demonstrated that it was putting the assistance it had already received to effective use against al-Qaeda. Petraeus emphasized that he understood the domestic political pressures but wanted to emphasize that it was a priority that Yemen does not become a safe haven for al-Qaeda. Specific programs the U.S. will seek to support include training four new Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU) elements in at-risk governorates, increasing the capacity of the Yemeni Coast Guard, and helping train the Yemeni Air Force to use four of its Mi-171 helicopters to enable counter-terrorism operations. Major General Charles Cleveland, the commanding general of SOCCENT, will bring a counter-terrorism cooperation proposal with him on his December 13 visit to Sana'a, General Petraeus said.

¶3. (S) In an earlier meeting at the Ministry of Defense (MOD) in Sana'a, Major General Ahmed al-Ashwal, the Yemeni Chief of Staff, offered a relatively hopeful assessment of the security situation and said that communication and training would "take the (bilateral) military relationship to better heights." Brigadier General Ahmed Ali Saleh, the President's son and commander of the Republican Guard and Yemen Special Operations Forces (YSOF), said that his organization is well-trained and well-prepared to move

against terrorists, but needs help to build battalions and develop greater aviation capacity. When asked about piracy, Major General al-Ashwal asserted, "The problem won't finish unless the Somali problem is resolved and a central government is established. Coalition forces in the area may help limit piracy, but they won't end it."

¶4. (S) "Terror is on everyone's mind," said Minister of the Interior Rashad al-Masri, whose meeting with General Petraeus focused on combating terror on all fronts) economically, legally, politically, and militarily. Al-Masri emphasized that the global economic crisis had a severe impact on Yemen, a fact which made USG funding for counter-terrorism operations vital. He also asked for increased training for the CTU forces and the Coast Guard and help with additional Coast Guard vessels. The Minister reported that the ROYG's draft counter-terrorism law is in Parliament awaiting consideration.

COMMENT - EMBASSY SANA'A

¶5. (S) President Saleh's characteristic bluster notwithstanding, he and General Petraeus seemed to develop a good rapport, an important first step in establishing a relationship with the leader of a nation the CENTCOM Commander has identified as a priority in the fight against al-Qaeda. Post looks forward to mid-month's visit by SOCCENT Commander for the opportunity it will provide to follow up on the issues that surfaced during General Petraeus' talks. END COMMENT.

COMMENT - CENTCOM

¶6. (S) In response to the protest General Petraeus lodged with President Saleh over the poor treatment his party received while clearing its communications gear and baggage upon arrival in Sana'a, Saleh ranted and characterized the affront as being due to an individual rather than a ROYG policy. President Saleh's characteristic bluster faltered upon learning that his airport officials were attempting to impound General Petraeus' team's outgoing baggage and communications gear even while the meeting was going on. General Petraeus stated that he would consider future treatment such as this a sign that the ROYG was not a friend that wanted assistance from the United States. Following that protracted exchange, the meeting between President Saleh and General Petraeus turned to a discussion of potential bilateral cooperation in the areas of counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, and maritime and coastal security. The meeting ended on a cordial note, and General Petraeus described it as an important first step in establishing a working relationship between himself and Yemen, a relationship Petraeus identified as a priority in the fight against al-Qaeda. END COMMENT.

¶7. (S) General Petraeus has cleared on this cable.

SECHE